

apuntes

Reflexiones teológicas desde el contexto Hispano-Latino

**And the Truth Shall Set You Free:
Liberation Theology, Praxis, and Colonization**

Luis G. Pedraja

**Completing the afflictions of Christ:
Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero**

Luis N. Rivera-Pagán

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From the Editor

The assassination of Bishop Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980, in El Salvador was a defining moment for the church. In our day and age, theology often is an exercise of the mind. We engage in our quest for truth in the theoretical arena of universities and we seek to profess it from our pulpits. We disagree on doctrine and at times, even go as far as challenging the positions held by others as heretical or wrong. We even exclude people from our churches and denomination based on theological views held by them or by us. But seldom do people die for their beliefs anymore. Yet, Romero's assassination, along with that of other martyrs in El Salvador, reminds us that theology is indeed a dangerous exercise. That people do indeed die for their faith and suffer for their beliefs. We may look back at a time when heretics were burned or slaughtered for their beliefs as a dark age long gone. But those days are not relegated to the pages of history. We still live in a world where people are killed for the sake of religion and where, as our current global conflicts remind us, theology can kill as much as it can heal.

Both of the articles in this issue of *Apuntes* hold a common thread in their relation to Oscar Romero. While hesitant to publish my own work, I was encouraged to publish my lecture at Wesley Theological Seminary—a lecture series named in honor of Romero. Thus, in this lecture, I aim to explore the difference between truth and knowledge, as well as the liberating role of truth in our lives. The other article, a sermon given by Dr. Luis Rivera Pagan at Perkins School of Theology on the anniversary of Oscar Romero's death, provides us with some insights on our calling to embody in our lives the sufferings of Christ for the sake of others, something that Romero exemplified for us.

And the Truth Shall Set You Free: Liberation Theology, Praxis, and Colonization¹

Luis G. Pedraja

Where is the Truth?

“And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” These words from John’s Gospel (John 8:32) are an often quoted slogan inscribed in the halls of academia and schools all over the world. Throughout human history, we have been fascinated with the quest for knowledge and truth. However, we must remember that the act of knowing is not identical to the truth. Knowing something does not guarantee that what we know is indeed true. The act of knowing and the object of knowing are not necessarily the same.

Knowledge is a powerful tool. It is so powerful that reading and writing was for eons reserved for the elite, not simply because access to information and the luxury of an education was costly, but because knowledge was and is a source of power. In some places and times, the education of slaves was prohibited, for too much knowledge could foment dissent or revolt. Ideas and ideologies can just as easily promote oppression as free the mind. Today, in particular, we live in an age of information, where knowledge is capital, and education is a coveted commodity. Thus, our ability to access, obtain, and manipulate information is not only a valuable tool,

¹ This paper was presented as the Oscar Romero Lecture at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., on March 4, 2008.

but a source of power, as well as a necessity for navigating the global environment that we inhabit.

Today, information is at our finger tips, available with the turn of a page, a flip of a switch, or a click on the keyboard. Yet, as readily available as information may be, as we swim in the streams of the information age, we can also easily drown in it.

As we begin to take information for granted, as we cease to distinguish among the sources and quality of the information that is made available to us, often we fail to differentiate between information and truth, thus ceasing to use judgment and discernment; we take things at face value and claim to know the truth. The value of what we are told or what we believe is not questioned; it is simply accepted as fact. Power is not only exercised through brute force and domination, but also by those who control and manipulate both the content of and our access to information. When we are blinded to the truth or when our access to it becomes barred by the chimera of knowledge, we become imprisoned, while all the time still believing that we are free. In time the truth becomes lost amidst the sea of information that inundates our lives.²

Truth and Liberation

The words of the evangelist are set in the context of freedom from the Jewish law, but they speak to a deeper truth that resonates with us all. First, implicit in the words is the tacit understanding that knowledge is not the same as truth. That

² Here I am reminded of Herber Marcuse's warning more than half a century ago in his epilogue to *Reason and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Humanities Press, 1954), pp. 433-34. In both thought and society, the controls placed upon us limit our freedom and shape our reality into a subdued submission.

which we may know or choose to believe might be a fantasy or a lie that deceives us. Knowledge in itself does not guarantee the truth. We may know volumes and yet all that we know may be for naught. Just because we "know" something does not mean it is necessarily true.

Second, the truth can set the captive free. Truth is liberating. It not only frees us from deception, but it helps us to recognize the conditions of our bondage and empowers us to act. Often, ignorance breeds fear and self deceit. Unless we contend with the truth; unless we seek out the truth, we remain trapped and unable to act.

Third, there is an inescapable link between truth and liberation. Liberation is an inevitable consequence of truth. Knowing the truth sets us free. Truth is not static cognition. It is not simply content. It is not simply information. Knowing the truth goes beyond the disclosure of information. Knowing the truth creates the act of liberation, because the truth not only empowers us to act, it requires us to act. The truth bears undeniable power and responsibility. How can one know the truth and remain captive to a lie? How can one know the truth, and allow the lie to continue? To fully understand the significance of these words, we must explore further the differences between knowledge, truth, and action.

The Forms of Reason and the Dichotomy of Knowledge and Action

For most of us, a disconnect exists between knowledge and action, between theory and practice. We think, but we do not necessarily act. Similarly, to the dismay of our friends and family, we often act, but do not think. In the philosophical and theological arenas, this disconnect can manifest itself in various ways. First, it may take the shape of theoretical reason

versus practical reason. While theoretical reason seeks the truth, it often fails to recognize its complicity in the distortion of the truth. Theoretical reason tries to determine what is the case, what something is, in order to accurately describe the state of things. But in doing so, it often becomes detached and removed in its quest for "objectivity." In effect, it reduces that which it seeks to grasp to an object. It objectifies reality, ultimately failing to grasp its role and participation in the act of grasping, an act that necessarily creates a relationship between the subject and the object. In that moment, the observer fails to see her own agenda, intentionality, and perspective, as well as how her own biases and context shapes her construction of the truth.

Practical reason, in contrast, tries to determine what is right, what is ethical, how one must act and behave. Rather than grasping a mere object to determine its nature, as may be the case with theoretical reason, practical reason examines the actions of a moral agent, a subject. Nevertheless, its name can be misleading. Practical or ethical reason, may seek to decide what the right course of action to take is, but it does not necessarily evoke an action. And in the same manner as theoretical reason, there is no guarantee that the course of action undertaken will necessarily be the right action. One's moral reasoning might just as easily lead one to a false conclusion or to an act, which may be deemed moral, yet be inherently reprehensible, destructive, and wrong. As history has proven, many a person have suffered oppression, exclusion, torture, and death for the sake of "morality" determined by a majority or by a social convention that later would prove to be reprehensible.

In theology, the dichotomy that exists between theory and action takes the forms of orthodoxy versus orthopraxis, or in more easily digested terms, right beliefs versus right actions. Just as with theoretical reason, we cannot assume that

what we believe is necessarily the truth. Often our beliefs are clouded by social conventions, cultural distortions, political agendas, and human limitations. Generally, we trust that our faith is well placed in God, but the object of our faith and the content of our faith are not always identical.³ Nor are faith and belief identical. Once more, as human history has proven throughout the ages, our faith can easily be placed upon an idol or something other than the true God.⁴ Even more, believing does not guarantee that we will act accordingly. Naturally, we may question, as do philosophers like Wittgenstein, whether we truly believe something if we do not act accordingly—for instance, if we truly believe that it is going to rain, would we not carry an umbrella? If you believed that a chair would collapse under your weight, would you still sit on it? Belief and action do not always coincide. Having faith in God does not necessarily guarantee moral behavior nor does moral behavior guarantee a commitment of faith. Regardless of what one might conclude, the reality is that orthodoxy does not guarantee moral and ethical behavior.

To complicate matters, I would also volunteer that our quest for right action does not necessarily guarantee the rightness and morality of our actions. We may undertake an action in the belief that it is the “right thing to do.” Yet, the ultimate rightness of the action may not be rooted in justice or in our sense of morality. Our motivation may be for far more utilitarian or egotistical purposes. Even when we do what we think is right, it may not be so or our motives may be tainted

³ For instance, Rudolf Bultmann, in his book, *What is Theology?* Ed. by Eberhard Jungel and Klaus Muller, trans. by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 49, differentiates between the object and the content of faith, arguing that theology should seek both.

⁴ This distinction is made by Paul Tillich in *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 10-11. Tillich also adds that the object of our faith can be idolatrous when placed upon something other than the true ultimate, which we identify with God.

by a far greater complicity in a corrupt moral system. Simply seeking to do the right thing does not necessarily mean that what one seeks to do is what is best or what is right. For instance, often in seeking to assist the poor or the oppressed we take on a paternalistic attitude that fails to consider their own opinion or simply impose our will upon them –we know what is best for them, or so we think.

Truth as a Liberating Event

In contrast to this harsh dichotomy between theory and practice, between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, we find the words of the evangelist. The truth dissolves the dichotomy between knowledge and action, for knowing the truth also evokes an action –liberation. The truth is an active reality that goes beyond content of knowledge, and brings together the act of knowing with the act of being set free.

Actually, as we look closely at scripture, in God the dichotomy between word and act melts away. In Genesis, God's word is also God's creative act. The prophetic voice does not merely disclose knowledge of the divine, it demands action. The disclosure of divine will is not merely a disclosure of knowledge or content, it is a demand upon us to act in its fulfillment. Divine revelation is not a communication of information or insight into God, a form of Gnostic knowledge to which we are privy. God's revelation occurs through divine act. We know who God is, not by what God says, but by what God does. The incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection upon which our faith is built are not mere words. We know who Jesus is, by what Jesus does.

When we reconsider the words of the evangelist, the truth, God's truth, is a liberating event. Truth is not merely reducible to cognition or knowledge; it is an act that creates a

reality. Truth frees us. Divine truth transcends the boundaries and dichotomies we create between reason, morality, responsibility, and action. In the words of the evangelist there is a promise and a command. We are promised the truth and its inevitable consequences that free us from the constraints of social conventions. But, there also appears to be anticipation that the truth will be disclosed and that it will evoke the act of liberation.

Liberation Theologies: Knowing, Hearing, and Doing the Truth

What we have come to know as liberation theologies today took shape at the crossroads of life. They were not created from the vantage point of detached critical reflection, as is the case with many academic disciplines and theological enterprises. Rather, they were born from the suffering of women and men facing oppression, injustice, discrimination, and violence. These were theologies crafted in the midst of struggle, born in blood, and baptized in tears. At the heart of these theologies, laid a prophetic thirst for justice and the ethical demand incumbent in God's all encompassing love for humanity—particularly those who are the least in society. How can we claim to love our neighbor, when our neighbor is being starved, segregated, raped, tortured, and murdered and we do nothing? How can we claim to love our neighbor when we exploit, deport, harass, humiliate, and discriminate against them? How can we justify debasing those who are made in the image and likeness of God, yet claim to be children of God?

Thus, liberation theologies emerged as prophetic voices crying in the wilderness of racial, gender, and socioeconomic injustices. These theologies made us look at society through God's eye, made us dream of what could and

should be, and forced us to realize that words without deeds are meaningless. That love without action was empty. Liberation theologies forced us to hear anew God's word alongside the cry of the people. And ultimately, they called us into action. For Latin American liberation theologians, this methodology was distilled into the tri-fold pastoral process of seeing, hearing, and doing.⁵ This methodology can be expanded beyond the Latin American context to other liberation theologies, which share a common struggle against various forms of oppression and help us to further explore how truth serves as a liberating event that dissolves the dichotomy between theory and action, theology and praxis.

Seeing

The first step in the process is to see fully the reality that surrounds us. It is quite easy for us to blind ourselves to the systemic violence, marginalization, discrimination, oppression, economic and sexual exploitation that plague a society, specially our own. Unlike many ages, we have greater access to information and news. Images from the farthest reaches of the world are beamed almost instantaneously into our homes and offices through television, computers, and even cell phones. In many respects, we may believe that we are better informed than previous generations and able to witness world events in an unprecedented way. We see news as it happens. But do we really see the truth?

⁵ Clodovis Boff develops this methodological paradigm derived from a pastoral methodology to define and clarify the methodology of liberation theology, equating each movement with three mediations: socioanalytic (seeing), hermeneutic (hearing), and practical (doing). "Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, originally published as *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts in Liberation Theology*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1993, 1996), pp. 11-21.

The images and news we receive are inevitably brought to us by global media outlets with particular perspectives, as well as both commercial and political agendas. If it bleeds it leads, we are told, especially if the bleeding is being done by someone who looks like most of us –in particular, those of the dominant culture, who are the primary consumers of the news.

While we live in a global economy with communication technologies that allow us access to the far reaches of the world, we often fail to see the world that surrounds us. We traverse the highways and byways of life, but fail to see those living in cardboard boxes and shanties beneath the highways or hidden in the allies of our cities. We drive by homes throughout our cities, but give little thought to the atrocities that happen behind closed doors. We shake our heads at the violence that surround us and then escape to the safety of our sheltered communities. But do we truly see? Do we see the truth behind what ails society?

Liberation theologies remind us to truly see, to truly know the truth, and not hide from the harsh realities that confront us. We are reminded that there are injustices in society and that it is our duty to see them. We are called to know the truth that lies behind them –whether it is systemic oppression, exploitation, dehumanization, or marginalization. And not only must we look closely at the situation and examine the root causes of it, but also see the truth in ourselves, the reality of our own complicity with the systemic exploitation, oppression, and dehumanization in which we engage, for we too reap the fruits of these injustices or are complicit in them by our own silence.⁶

⁶ Clodovis Boff, identifies seeing with a socioanalytic approach that examines the root causes of oppression and rejects both the empiricist and functionalist explanations, the first which says that poverty is a vice and the second which says poverty is backwardness. He favors the dialectical explanation that poverty is oppression with sin at its root. He supplements

Hearing

The second step, hearing, refers to more than hearing the cries of the people. In actuality, it means both hearing the scriptures anew and listening to the people. Through centuries we have heard the stories of the Bible, colored by layers of interpretations and assumptions. We read the scriptures, but we read them through particular contextual and cultural lenses. Most of us know that the scriptures are laden with interpretations and are familiar with the many hermeneutical and exegetical tools that are available to us. Those of us who have studied biblical languages can explore the shades of meaning of the Hebrew or Greek texts. We may deconstruct the meaning of the text or try to capture the *Sitz im Leben* of the author. Yet, because we can not escape our interpretive contexts, none of these techniques can guarantee that we necessarily hear the truth.⁷

To be able to hear the truth, we must be able and willing to hear that which we do not like just as readily as that which we find uplifting. We must be willing to identify not just with the heroes and heroines of faith, as we often do, but also to accept that we may have more in common with the villains of the stories.

the socioanalytic analysis with a historical mediation on the historical processes that create modern oppression and a discussion on the use of Marxism. Ibid., pp. 11-13.

⁷ Boff equates "hearing" with hermeneutics and proposes a hermeneutics that "prioritizes the *application* over that of explanation." Ultimately, it is to re-discover the transforming energy of the biblical text, as well as the social teachings of the Catholic Church and the Christian tradition, ultimately in relation to constructive theologies. Ibid., pp. 16-19.

When the prophet Nathan confronts King David regarding his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, he does so through a story. In the story, he tells of the rich and powerful man who steals and slaughters the only little pet lamb of a poor family, instead of using one from his flock. King David is outraged and is ready to doll out his wrath upon such a person, failing to realize that he is the perpetrator in the story. The same is true for most of us. When we hear the biblical stories, we do not see ourselves as the perpetrators of evil. We do not hear the Scripture's judgment upon us and our complicity in the sin that oppresses and exploits those at the margins of our own society.

Liberation theologians call us to hear the scriptures anew from the perspective and context of the little ones of society –the marginalized and exploited people amongst us. When we read in the scriptures that we must rest and keep the Sabbath holy for the Lord, we tend to gloss over Exodus 20:9, which reads “six days you should labor and do all your work.” We do not recognize that there is an expectation that we should be able to find work. But how do the day laborers and the unemployed read such a text?

When we read the story of the Good Shepherd, we quickly identify with the shepherd or with the sheep, but not with the wolves that devour the heard or with the hirelings, those, who like most of us ministers, have been charged with protecting the weak but scatter in the face of danger. We need to be willing to hear how others interpret the very same scriptures we have come to cherish and accept that they may find dimensions of truths in these very same scriptures that we have failed to see.

In addition, we not only need to hear the way that the marginalized read the scriptures, but also be willing to listen to them. It is very easy for those of us in power, with well

meaning attitudes, to come and tell others what they need or to give them what we think they may want. But in failing to listen to them, we often fall prey to paternalistic attitudes that do not empower the oppressed and the marginalized, but instead perpetuate our biases and force them to stay reliant on us. When we give advice with a condescending tone, when we readily dismiss ideas, or impose our own perceptions and solutions upon the marginalized without truly listening, we are muting their voices and turning a deaf ear to their cries as readily as if we ignored them. In order to empower the marginalized, the act of hearing involves allowing them to find their voice and to take seriously their reading of scripture, their concerns, their decisions, and their contributions.

Finally we need to be able to hear not only the cries and voices of the marginalized, but also both the scriptures and the cries that call us to action –call us to set God’s people free and to care for those who are the least in society. Hearing the truth entails hearing God’s call to action on behalf of the powerless of society. Oscar Romero, not only saw the needs of the people of Salvador and heard their cry, but he also heeded their voices and the call for action. He acted on their behalf and gave them a voice of their own through his life and advocacy.

Doing

The final methodological movement of liberation theologies occurs through our action. God’s truth demands us to act on its behalf. God’s truth sets the captive free and calls us to set free those who are living a lie. To say that we love God, yet not act on behalf of those created in God’s image presents us with an inherent contradiction. God’s love for all humanity demands that we act decisively on behalf and for the betterment of all humanity. While we may be tempted to

reduce truth to a concept, we can also be tempted to reduce love to feelings and emotion. Yet, like truth, love does not exist without the actions that convey it. An understanding of love in its truest sense moves beyond feelings and emotions. We know love not through words, but through the actions that convey a loving relationship. In the same manner that divine truth is not merely an abstract conceptual fact, but a reality bound up with the act of liberation, God's love cannot be thought of as an abstract. God's love is always revealed through God's act and self-sacrifice on behalf of others.⁸

Ultimately, when we as theologians speak about truth, we understand it as an objective and conceptual set of facts. We conceive of it primarily as a rational function or a descriptive narrative that discloses the way things actually and objectively are. And therein lays the fallacy. First, we understand truth as an abstraction and thus remove it from concrete reality and human experience. Reality is not static; it is active. Thus, the same must be said for truth. Second, we see truth as an object of reflection, rather than as a decisive subjective act. If reality is not static but active, that is, if reality is act, then it begs the question of who is the actor. Then the question is not what truth is, but who creates the truth.

Is it an objective datum that we can possess? For most of us, truth is a thing, a mere construction or artifact through which we conceptualize the world. In this sense, truth is created by us and those around us, making it contextual and relative. However, if we go beyond that which we perceive as true, the truth that we create, and assume a totality of truth, then we must inevitably seek an all-encompassing decisive

⁸ In my book, *Jesus is my Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), I elaborate the point that love, and in particular, God's love, cannot be understood in abstraction, but must be understood through its instantiation and action, pp. 52-53.

subjective and creative actor than ourselves. If such an actor is God, then we must accept that for God, concept and act, word and deed, cannot be separated. An inevitably, God's revelation and self-disclosure is truth and act inescapably bound. Like both love and reality, truth is dynamic (active) rather than static.

Allow me to unpack this a bit further. In my book, *Jesus is my Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective*, I mention that in Spanish the words of John 1:1 read a bit different from the English versions of the Bible. In Spanish, we do not read "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word became flesh." Instead, we read, "In the beginning was the Verb." The Greek word "*logos*" is translated, not as "Word," but as "Verb." Naturally, this came about from the translations into Spanish of the Latin, *Verbum*, which can mean both "verb" and "word." I would venture to say and have argued elsewhere that this is a possible translation of *logos* in that it captures the active and creative dimensions of the Greek term. To understand the divine Word as God's verb collapses the distinction between concept and act. God's ultimate revelation in the incarnation is as an active word, a verb. It is God's truth and act together; it is divine love manifested through divine action.

In theology we put forth a lot of terminology—a lot of verbiage and jargon. Thus, we speak of ontology (the structure or study of being), theology, orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and even orthopathos (right feeling). Not wanting to be left out, let me propose another term, ontopraxis (being and act).⁹ Ultimately, truth, love, creation, revelation, and even the incarnation manifest an inseparable connection between being and act. We are what we do and who we are is the legacy of what others have done. Being is not a static reality, but an

⁹ *Jesus is My Uncle*, pp. 105-106.

active reality. Although many have said it in various ways, this concept can be summarized in a simplistic manner by borrowing a line from a popular cultural icon: "It is not who you are, but what you do that defines you."¹⁰

Liberation theologies are not novel ideas; they are rooted in the age old biblical notions of truth and love. The calls for doing justice and caring for those in need that we find in liberation theologies do not emerge as the result of a cutting edge contextual or constructive theology that departs from the tried and true classical theologies. Rather, it is an attempt to recover the biblical truth –the prophetic call for doing justice and loving mercy that somehow have been left out of our humble walk with God (Micah 6:7-9).

In both truth and love, there is an inherent ethical demand to act on behalf of others who struggle under the burden of deceit and hatred. If we see the truth and hear the truth, but fail to act, we have accomplished nothing and one might even question if we have truly seen or heard. Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy proposes that the ethical demand precedes ontological, theoretical, and practical reason. In the face of the other that confronts us, we recognize a subject that beckons us and elicits from us a response – evoking in us the moral demand and responsibility to act.

Liberation theologies are rooted in that moment of seeing and hearing the other as a person, as subject rather than object. It is that moment that shapes us into moral agents and beckons us to act. It is in that moment that truth and liberation coincide. One cannot see and hear without acting, but what happens if we become removed from those moments that force us to confront the face of the exploited other?

¹⁰ This is a line uttered by Batman in the movie *Batman Begins*.

Colonizing Knowledge and Liberating Truth

This brings me to the final point. What occurs to the truth when are unable to see, to hear, or to act? What occurs to the truth when we are so far removed from the people that our theologies no longer reflect or affect the lives of the marginalized? To be blunt, let me ask the question directly: are liberation theologies in danger of becoming co-opted by the academic establishment and thus, colonized in a sense. Are they so far removed from the people that they can no longer see or hear or act?

While we may see liberation theologies as a fairly new theological movement, we must also concede that they have been around for almost forty years.¹¹ Even Latino/a theologies are now decades old. These theologies now are taught in our universities and seminaries. They are recognized, if not accepted, by mainstream academia. The same liberation theologians that once wrote from the margins are now teaching at major mainstream American universities.

Meanwhile, young generations of scholars greedily seek to carve out their niche in the theological arenas through critical, contextual, socio-cultural, political, or narrative analysis of these theologies. We publish our dissertations and our books, gaining the praise of critical theorist and postmodern scholars as we relate the theological ideas du jour to the paradigms of liberation theologies. While these may be important developments in maturing theologies, one may wonder if this second order reflection detracts from the immediacy of these theologies. Can these theologies that are rooted in the struggle of a people and seek to empower action

¹¹ Latin American liberation theologies trace their early roots to the Medellin conference held in 1968. Other liberation theologies have roots in the civil rights movements of the sixties.

survive when they become removed from the people and the act of liberation?

In many respects, theology is an art of interpretation. We are translating from one context to another –whether it is from scriptures, tradition, philosophy, or practice, we seek to shed light on a situation or to enhance our understanding of God. Thus, with that in mind, let me offer a paradigm that may help illustrate my point regarding the detachment of theology from the lived experiences of the people: we can be interpreters, translators, or paraphrasers.

First, let us consider the interpreter. She is someone who is present in the moment, working in the midst of the event. In this sense, they are in the trenches. To be a good interpreter, one must be fully fluent in both languages, as well as knowledgeable and immersed in both linguistic contexts. Interpreters do not have the luxury to look up words or to consult someone. They must be able to convey the nuances and shades of meaning inherent in the words at a moments notice.

The translator, on the other hand, may be at a certain level detached from the moment. To be a good translator, they must know both worlds fairly well, but they have the luxury of time. They can look for a dictionary; they can look for the correct word. They can use lexicons and familiarize themselves with both worlds in their task.

Contrary to the interpreter and the translator, those who paraphrase do not need to know both worlds. They can take the translated volumes and contextualize them to another context, without necessarily being immersed in both contexts. In this sense, they are still engaged in the art of contextualizing a narrative, but far removed from the immediacy of the language and easily led to misinterpretation.

Now, if we apply this paradigm to the theologian, are we interpreters, translators, or paraphrasers of theology? While I believe that we can be all three, I think that there are radical differences in the way we do theology and the manner in which we know it. Are we in the moment, living in full solidarity with the people as we interpret their voice, needs, and concerns by framing them within a theological paradigm? Are we translators, who are now removed from the moment, but still are fully cognizant of the context of marginalization that we translate into our theological frameworks? Or are we merely paraphrasing, taking the theological works of others and contextualizing into an alternate framework, while never truly being immersed in the life and context of marginalization?

More so, I would venture to ask: Are we, as theologians, making our name and advancing our careers on the backs of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized? Are we theologizing for their sake, to make their voices heard, or simply using their plight to advance our careers? How can we, who live in the hallowed halls of the academy, sitting in our endowed chairs, being paid hefty honorariums to pontificate on the subject, truly claim to live in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Are we interpreters or translators? Or are we, dare I say, paraphrasers, contextualizing theology not within the lives of people, but within the frameworks of detached theological discourse?

Ultimately, I will venture to say that liberation theologies are becoming colonized by academia. Slowly and methodically, liberation theologies are being sanitized and tamed by the lure of theological legitimization; they are being assimilated. And in this process of assimilation they have lost their edge and risk losing their relevance to the people. I will even be as bold as to claim that liberation theologies are no

longer free, but captive to the academic enterprise of cold, objective, and impotent detachment. And I truly hope that I am wrong, for we need true liberation today as much as ever.

Individual such Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Oscar Romero, lived their theology. They did theology with their lives and through their action. They changed lives and spoke for those who did not have a voice. Today, I wonder if we are merely speaking to ourselves or even trying to ingratiate ourselves with those in power. Are we seeking to legitimize our theologies and our careers by contextualizing theology, not on the living realities from which they were born, but in through accommodating ourselves to the status quo of Theology, with a capital T, to critical reflection, the academy, and ideology? Have liberation theologies become colonized by mainstream theology? I think that we are certainly close if not yet there.

At this point, I must also offer a caveat. I am not proposing irrationality or anti-intellectualism. Our faith and our actions must be examined. Critical reflection is an essential part of "hearing" the people and the scriptures. What I am questioning is our motivation and our distance from the plight of the people. Have we stopped seeing? Have we stopped hearing? Have we stopped doing? Some have not, but I suspect many of us have. Critical reflection necessitates distance and detachment to some degree. Yet, in our desire to be heard by mainstream theologies, have we not risked becoming detached from the people we claim to represent (speak for?)? Have we not de facto become colonized by the very mainstream theologies we sought to criticize?

Truth collapses the divide between reason and action. If theology seeks the truth, then theology must be a liberating enterprise. Theology cannot afford to be removed from the lives of the people of faith. Nor can we afford to stay silent as

people struggle to survive under inhumane circumstance. We must stand in solidarity with the undocumented and the uninsured, as well as with the working poor, the victims of violence, torture, exploitation, and marginalization –all of whom are our neighbors in this global village.

Our search for truth should be guided by the theology of the cross and not the theology of glory. If truth sets us free, then theology must be a liberative enterprise that speaks for and to those who are captive not only by their sin, but also by the sins of others. As theologians, we must seek out the places in society where we find the cross –where the innocent are held captive, tortured, violated, exploited, abandoned, excluded and killed. For it is there that truth is to be found, waiting to set us all free, the captive and the captor alike.

Resumen

El autor usa las palabras del evangelio de Juan (8: 32) para desarrollar su argumento de que la verdad y el conocimiento no son idénticos, y que la verdad requiere el acto liberador. Trazando una trayectoria que analiza ciertos diferentes tipos de razonamiento –teorético, moral, y vocativo (el razonamiento de la fe) –para detallar como el objeto de cada tipo no son necesariamente idénticos con la verdad ni evocativos a la acción. La verdad se identifica con el acto divino que une la acción y concepto.

El autor continua el argumento examinando la teología de liberación y el triple acto pastoral del praxis (ver, oír, y actuar) y la relación de ellos a la verdad liberativa. En

conclusión, el autor examina si la teología de liberación puede existir separada del momento actual y la existencia cotidiana del oprimido usando un paradigma de el acto de traducción.

Completing the afflictions of Christ: Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero

Luis N. Rivera-Pagán

“I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”¹²

Colossians 1: 23^b-24

We Protestants usually stress the absolute uniqueness of Jesus’s sacrifice. However, the author of the letter to Colossians affirms that in the sufferings of his flesh he is completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of the church. Quite a mysterious statement, indeed! Allow me to explore this enigmatic assertion by referring to an event that the Latin American church has recently again remembered: the assassination of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador. Twenty-eight years ago, on March 24, 1980, Archbishop Romero was finishing a homily in a small chapel when he was mortally wounded. The last words of his sermon were, alas, prophetic indeed:

“We know that every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us . . . May this body [of Christ] and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and our blood to suffering and to pain – like

¹² Sermon preached on April 9, 2008 at Perkins Chapel, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

Christ, not for self, but to bring justice and peace for our people.”

I will suggest to you today that again, in this tragic event, another Christian apostle was completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of the church.

The assassination of Romero was not an isolated act. It was a time in history in which some of the Central American nations were engulfed in bloody strife. The Sandinista regime, in Nicaragua, faced a violent counterrevolution. The Maya Quiche communities in Guatemala suffered merciless repression. El Salvador was a killing field for all those who were engaged in social movements for human liberation.

And yet, the assassination of an Archbishop is not a quotidian happening. The Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino has observed that Romero might be the first Archbishop murdered for political reasons since knights loyal to the English king, Henry II, killed Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the twelfth century. However, Sobrino also indicates a crucial difference between both assassinations: “While Tomas à Becket . . . was murdered at the altar for defending the legitimate interests and freedom of the church, Archbishop Romero was murdered at the altar for defending the interests of the poor.”

The idea of the episcopate as a prophetic defender of the powerless and destitute is not new in the Americas. Since the early years of the European invasions the prophetic voice of protest and resistance has always been uttered. In his “Third Pastoral Letter” (1978) Romero alludes to this tradition:

“This prophetic mission of the church in defense of the poor, who have had a special place in the heart of the

Lord, numbers among its apostles in Latin America such men as Fray Antonio de Montesinos, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Bishop Juan del Valle, and Bishop Antonio Valdivieso, who was assassinated in Nicaragua because of his opposition to the landowners and governor.”

At issue for Romero in his homilies, Episcopal letters, lectures, essays, was the immense challenges that the situation of injustice in El Salvador and in Latin America meant to the church. It was a paradoxical situation in which a government and an army, nominally Christian, persecuted, and repressed a poor and devout Christian people. That the church did not speak out against the so many injustices done under the guise of “Christian” civilization was for him an unbearable theological and ethical abomination. Social oppression and its religious justification, under the semblance of a Christian civilization, became for him a “mystery of iniquity”.

Romero was not, when named to head the San Salvador church, politically or theologically radical. It was the tragic plight of the downtrodden communities, destitute of material goods, despised by the powerful national oligarchy and foreign corporations, and repressed when they dared to express their protest, that changed drastically his theology and pastoral outlook. One might speak here of a “conversion”, not to be a Christian or a priest, but to be a Christian and a pastor who dedicates the rest of his life to be a prophet of solidarity. The church, Romero became convinced, has to be a prophetic community if it is to be faithful to Jesus and to the people of God.

The prophetic character of the church has two dimensions – denunciation of sin and idolatry, annunciation of the reign of God and its ethical implications. Romero was

convinced that the traditional abstract oburgations and moralistic platitudes against sin would not do. Sin has to be named with precision: it is the oppression of the poor, the repression of the popular organizations, and the persecution of dissenters. In religious terms –the idolatry of wealth and power, the veneration of Mammon. As the biblical prophets condemned the veneration of idols and the exploitation of the poor, so must the church in Latin America rebuke the idolatries of wealth and power and the injustices suffered by the people. As the former lashed against the incoherence of sharing in the rituals of religious sacrifices and oppressing the people, so must the prophetic church today criticize the contradiction of participating in the Eucharist and exploiting the poor.

“If Christians are nourished in the Eucharistic communion, where their faith tells them they are united to Christ’s life, how can they live as idolaters of money, idolaters of power . . .? How can a Christian who receives holy communion be an idolater?”

My dear brothers and sisters, there are many who receive communion and are idolaters.”

The denunciation of idolatry is the preamble to the annunciation of the proclamation of the kingdom of God, its justice and its ethical demands. “The principal concern that I urge as pastor, he constantly repeated, is that we build the kingdom of God.”

Romero was aware of the bitter conflicts that unavoidably would emerge from a prophetic stance. He was, since the beginning of his office as Archbishop, sensitive to the costly price to be paid by those who would dare to utter the

prophetic voice. He was also willing to pay that price. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhöffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945, he was acutely conscious that “grace is not cheap,” that Christian discipleship entails, in times of intense crises, the sharing in Jesus’ crucifixion.

“See how the accusations against the prophets of all times are the same. When the prophet bothers the consciences of the selfish . . . he is a nuisance and must be eliminated, murdered, thrown into a pit, persecuted, not allowed to speak the word that annoys . . .

It is always the same. The prophet has to speak of society’s sin and call to conversion, as the church is doing today in San Salvador . . . just as Jeremiah did.”

In a social situation of oppression, injustice and the idolatry of wealth and power, one of the signs of the prophetic church is the persecution it suffers. To the members of the church, among them, at times, the majority of the bishops of El Salvador’s national Episcopal conference, who insisted that for the protection of the church the Archbishop had to tone down his criticisms to the national ruling elites, Romero recalled the biblical bond between prophecy and persecution.

“Evangelizing is not just saying words. Preaching is relatively easy . . . but when one tries to incarnate that teaching, then the conflicts arise. And this is the life of our archdiocese, dear friends, because not all are willing to live a commitment to witness . . . but every priest, religious, or lay person who wants to announce Christ’s gospel in truth must suffer persecution.”

Once, in a ceremony of confirmation, he asked what it means to be confirmed as a true Christian in a situation of

extreme injustice. Confirmation, he answered, might become "a sacrament of martyrdom." The homily also forcefully asserts that the message of faithfulness even until death is also and mainly directed towards him, the pastor of the church.

"Beginning with me, the bishop, may this morning be for us a renewal of . . . the courage that we must have as Christians. And, if necessary, may confirmation become for us a sacrament of martyrdom. May we too be ready to give our lives for Christ and not betray him with the cowardice of today's false Christians."

The prophetic church has to speak the word of God in a society Christian in name but godless in its social structures. Authentic preaching is not the usual homiletics, bland, and adorned with flowering rhetoric. Neither should it restrict itself to matters of individual morality. It has to address with clear and direct words the social, collective, injustices that mutilate the existence of so many human beings. The church's preaching has to face what Romero called "a system full of sin."

Karl Rahner once said that in the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church kept the sacrament and lost the ministry of the word while the Protestant churches kept the ministry of the word and lost the sacrament. If true, that statement did not apply to Romero. He understood the value of preaching, the freedom, responsibility, and authority of his pulpit. Every sermon, every homily of his became a sacramental event of communion with God and the people. As in the case of the biblical prophets and Jesus, that meant trouble, conflict, and antagonism. Romero knew it and accepted this risky consequence.

“A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that?”

Very nice, pious considerations that doesn’t bother anyone, that’s the way many would like preaching to be. Those preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in . . . The gospel is courageous . . .”

Adopting a slogan common those days among many Latin American theologians, he transformed his preaching into a “voice of the voiceless”.

“The homilies try to be this people’s voice. They try to be the voice of those who have no voice. And so, without doubt, they displease those who have too much voice.”

Romero’s homilies became critical commentaries regarding the constant violation of human rights in El Salvador. Transmitted by radio, they were heard with close attention, also, alas, by people greatly annoyed by the tone and content of those sermons. The archdiocese radio station was bombed several times. That would not subdue the bishop-prophet. In a Sunday homily, after one of the bombings, he expressed his determination not to be silenced by threats or acts of violence.

“This attack is an attempt to silence the prophetic and pastoral voice of the archdiocese, simply because it is trying to be the voice of the voiceless, because it has

reported the systematic violation of human rights, because it has tried to tell the truth, defend justice, and spread the Christian message.

From the times of Jesus, that message has shocked the powerful. It shocked the powerful of his time but, as now, was listened to and accepted by the poor and simple."

Romero well knew that prophetic preaching irritates the idolaters of wealth and power. They will try to silence the prophetic voice, by any means possible - persuasion, bribe, or violence. When several Catholic priests and catechists were killed, important members of El Salvador social elite, including some bishops, asked him to moderate his critiques. Romero would not budge. Martyrdom became for him a sign of Christian authenticity. In a nation in which human rights of peasants, workers, students, and intellectuals were grossly violated, why should the church be spared? "This is communion in love," he said after the murder of a priest.

"It would be sad, if in a country where murder is being committed so horribly, we were not to find priests also among the victims. They are the testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of its people."

This is the fateful destiny of authentic prophetic preaching, "to be, like Christ, a sign of contradiction." In the persecution it suffers, the church identifies herself with the tragic fate of the poor.

"The church suffers the fate of the poor, which is persecution. Our church glories that it has mingled the blood of its priests, its catechists, and its communities

with that of the massacred people and has continually borne the mark of persecution.”

Bitter resistance to the prophetic word, however, comes not only from the secular powers. It also emerges from the structures of power inside the church. Romero had to bear constant criticism from several of his fellow bishops, who were concerned about the safety, well-being or even traditional privileges of the church. He found it extremely painful to observe fellow collaborators abandoning the struggle for human liberation when faced with its probable costly consequences.

“I know that for many the hour of testing has come, and they have fled . . . People we thought very strong are frightened away because they have forgotten that this is a religion of life and, as life, it must clash with the life that is not God’s life but exists as the kingdom of darkness and of sin in the world.”

His three years as Archbishop of San Salvador were marked by a difficult tug of war inside the national Episcopal conference. He became convinced that the church had to undergo a profound process of conversion, if its convocation to a radical transformation of society were to be perceived as genuine.

“The prophet also decries sins inside the church. . . . We bishops, popes, priests, nuns, Catholic educators – we are human, and as humans we are sinful and we need someone to be a prophet for us too and call us to conversion.”

Romero accompanied his church in a painful process of reflection regarding its complicity with the structures of social injustice. His homilies became an important literary testimony to this profound spiritual conflict. The church, he does not tire to reiterate, needs to undergo a deep and drastic process of change, *metanoia*, if it is to be a genuine witness of God's reign. The ecclesiastical transformation is not to be restricted to the inner spirituality; it cannot be limited to piety and devout feelings, or liturgical renewal. It entails a new attitude towards the evils of society.

"A religion of Sunday Mass but of unjust weeks does not please the Lord. . . . A church that sets itself up only to be well off, to have a lot of money and comfort, but that forgets to protest injustices, would not be the true church of our divine Redeemer."

Only a transformed church can become a "sacrament of salvation."

And yet, the prophetic voice leaves open the possibility of repentance and reconciliation. Romero, in his preaching, sustained the hope of reaching the hearts and minds of the violators of human rights.

"I repeat again what I have said here so often . . . those who perhaps have caused so many injustices and acts of violence, those who have brought tears to so many homes, those who have stained themselves with the blood of so many murders, those who have hands soiled with tortures . . . To all of them I say: No matter your crimes, they are ugly and horrible, and you have abased the highest dignity of a human person, but God calls you and forgives you."

Romero was a pastor, not a theologian. Yet, his preaching demonstrates his careful and deliberate attention to the ground shaking Latin American theological production in the seventies. One of the main dimensions of that theology was the conceptual elaboration of a Christology from a liberation perspective. Two themes of that Christology are present in several of Romero's homilies and pastoral messages: the presence of the passion of Jesus in the suffering of the poor and oppressed and the *kenosis* of Christ.

Christ, according to Romero, is present in a veiled and hidden manner in the travails of the poor, the persecuted, the tortured, and the murdered. Their affliction gives plenitude to the passion of Christ.

"If we could see that Christ is the needy one, the torture victim, the prisoner, the murder victim, and in each human figure so shamefully thrown by our roadsides we could see Christ himself cast aside, we would pick him up like a medal of gold to be kissed lovingly."

Romero emphasized the identification of the passion of Christ with the suffering of the poor and persecuted in an address on the occasion of the conferral of a doctorate honoris causa by the University of Louvain, Belgium:

"Real persecution has been directed against the poor, the body of Christ in history today. They, like Jesus, are the crucified, the persecuted servant of Yahweh. They are the ones who make up in their own bodies that which is lacking in the passion of Christ."

Following closely another New Testament text, Philippians 2: 5-11, the *kenosis* hymn, Romero exhorts

Christians to follow Christ's example of incarnation, abasement, and sacrifice.

"This is the commitment of being a Christian: to follow Christ in his incarnation. If Christ, the God of majesty, became a lowly human and lived with the poor and even died on a cross like a slave, our Christian faith should also be lived in the same way. The Christian who does not want to live this commitment of solidarity with the poor is not worthy to be called Christian."

Romero was well aware of the possible deadly consequences of such incarnational Christology. He had received several death threats and well knew that in his country those warnings were to be taken with utmost seriousness. He knew that the forbearance of the ruling clans was as limited as great were their economic interests. In an interview to a Mexican newspaper, two weeks before his assassination, he foreshadowed it and gave a theological and pastoral interpretation of his possible personal fate. He was able to transform his personal tragedy into a sign of hope, a symbol of resurrection.

"I have frequently been threatened with death . . . As a pastor I am bound by a divine command to give my life for those whom I love... If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. . . . If God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality.

May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people, and as a witness of hope in what is to come. You can tell them, if they succeed in

killing me, that I pardon and bless those who may carry the killing . . .

A bishop will die, but the church of God - the people - will never die."

Today, twenty-eight years after his murder, we celebrate and commemorate the life and ministry of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who in his flesh was completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of his body, the church. The question might come back to us, at an unexpected time or place, for we are not always able to steer our personal fate: are we also ready to complete in our flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church?

If that moment ever comes, may God bless you, dear sisters and brothers!

Resumen

En un sermón predicado en el aniversario de la muerte del Arzobispo Oscar Romero en el Salvador, el autor usa las palabras del Apóstol Pablo en Colosenses para desarrollar su argumento de que Romero en su muerte estaba completando el sufrimiento y las aflicciones de Cristo y de su iglesia. Arriesgando la muerte, el Arzobispo defendió los derechos de los pobres y oprimidos del Salvador, quienes eran perseguidos y asesinados al presentar críticas del sistema socio-político y de la oligarquía que controlaba el país. Al identificarse con la causa de los pobres y de los oprimidos, Oscar Romero tomó una posición pastoral en la cual reconocía la posibilidad de ser asesinado. En tomar esa posición y someterse al riesgo en

su identificación con los pobres, Romero desarrollo en su vida una cristología de encarnación al en la cual demostró el llamamiento de Cristo a su iglesia —el arriesgarse a completar en nuestra vida y carne las aflicciones que Cristo sufrió por la humanidad.